



# Weekly Briefing

**Albania social briefing:**  
**Digital governance in a society not prepared for it**  
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# **Digital governance in a society not prepared for it**

## **Summary**

*Digitalization is an epochal change, it is a necessity, and it is the only alternative to take the well-being and way of life to a new stage. It is the space where almost all future transactions will be executed and societies are preparing for that. The government of Albania has prioritized the field also because it is one of the prerequisites to achieving European Union (EU) accession criteria. For these reasons, digital governance in Albania has become a basic slogan as a concept of good governance and the rule of law in modern times. All the above are more than understandable and welcomed in theory, yet in practice, it is a long process, not a deadline to be achieved at any cost.*

## **Introduction**

The Albanian government has introduced 472 online services through registration on the portal e-albania. From a birth certificate to healthcare services, to pensions, social security declarations, etc., around 95% of what an Albanian citizen needs in terms of documentation has gone online. It is argued that if there is no face time with the government employees then there is less corruption. This would be a great leap in the developmental path of society if the conditions on the ground were appropriate, but in reality, it is affecting negatively people who do not have access to the internet and the elderly. These abilities cannot be achieved in the way of “learning by doing” - but mostly by technical support, training, and facilitation.

## **Introduction to the citizens: a revolution!**

It is argued that the existence of automated state services is the most efficient way to reduce corruption, bureaucracy, and inefficiency of public administrations worldwide. For months, the government had prepared the public for the transitioning of the services online but had not prepared citizens on what exactly was about to happen, or how to deal with it. In April 2022, Prime Minister (PM) Edi Rama would proudly state that now “the state goes to the citizen, and no longer the citizen to the state.” The counters of service to the public were closed and all went online for the final aim of improving the service of public administration to citizens and businesses. Starting from May 2022, every public service is offered online. According to Rama, this is a new era and a historic station of the Digital Revolution that puts an end to queues, procrastination, and of course, bribes. Rama further stated that Albania is way ahead of

developed countries in terms of online services and is among the first to offer document services through the national digital platform. Emphasizing all the positive changes brought by the online transfer of services, the PM stressed that all those who work at the counters will not be left without a job, but will continue to transfer their workload to other government activities. The Albanian PM continued: “The new era of non-counter services begins. Albania has entered the elite of the most developed countries for digital governance and is one of the first to offer document services through the national digital platform. This is a historic step for the country.”<sup>1</sup> – But, is it truly so? To name it a revolution would be an overstatement, yet, there is some type of revolution; the proper way to describe it would be a chaotic revolution. There are several shortcomings of this online system, especially for those whose abilities and internet access are limited. The whole process is accompanied by delays and high costs.

### **Society is not ready for going online with services**

For a policy to be successful there should be at least some kind of knowledge of the targeted groups. What happened is that there is an online platform for all the population of Albania while only a quarter of it can properly use it.

Albania ranks last in Europe with the lowest percentage of people aged 16 to 74, who have at least a digital skills base. The latest data demonstrate that only 24% of the population in the country has basic technological skills. These figures were published by the Eurostat monitoring report of 2022, in the framework of sustainable development objectives. The indicators presented are based on the EU survey on the use of ICT (Information, Communication, and Technology) in households and by individuals. According to the report, this is a prerequisite for achieving the set objectives as education and training are the main drivers for economic growth and jobs because they help in productivity, innovation, and competition.

The figures show that the percentage of people who have basic technology skills in Albania is -30 percentage points from the European Union (EU) average, where the same indicator was recorded at 54%. At the regional level, Montenegro has the best position with the highest percentage; where 47% of individuals aged 16 to 74 have basic digital skills. It is followed by Serbia with 41%, North Macedonia with 35%, and Bosnia and Herzegovina also with 35%. Among the first countries in Europe with the highest percentage of people with basic digital abilities is Iceland with 81%; The Netherlands, Finland, and Norway with 79% each, etc. Apart from Albania, among the last countries in Europe, there is Romania, Turkey, and

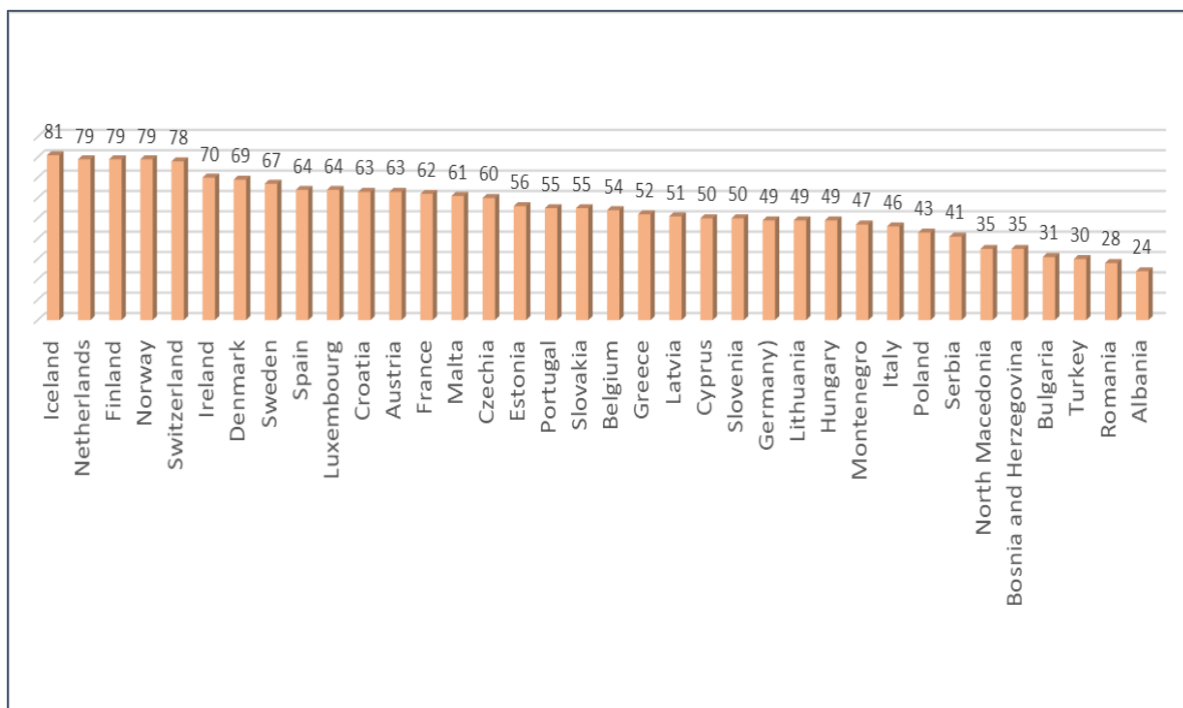
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<sup>1</sup> VOX NEWS (2022, April 27). Nga 1 maji të gjitha shërbimet kalojnë online, mbyllen sportelet. Available at <https://www.voxnews.al/aktualitet/nga-1-maji-te-gjitha-sherbimet-kalojne-online-mbyllen-sportelet-i7111>

Bulgaria.<sup>2</sup> The data analyzed is based on selected activities performed by individuals in specific areas with internet usage. Until 2019, these indicators included information, communication, problem-solving, and software, while from 2021 onwards there was added the security element.

If we are to compare the data for all the countries analyzed, the situation unfolds as below:

Individuals' level of digital skills (Unit: Percentage % of individuals)



Source: EUROSTAT (own graphic elaboration) <sup>3</sup>

Not only Albania is ranked last out of all, but also if we are to analyze the data by the EU average, the situation displays as below. With this scenario, it is almost impossible to have a productive online solution.

Individuals' level of digital skills comparison EU vs. Albania

<sup>2</sup> SKAN News (2022, June 14). Aftësia digjitale, Shqipëria në fund të Europës/ EUROSTAT: Vetëm 1 në 4 shqiptarë kanë aftësi bazë të teknologjike. Available at <https://siu.scan-tv.com/aftesia-digjitale-shqiperia-ne-fund-te-europes-eurostat-vetem-1-ne-4-shqiptare-kane-aftesi-baze-te-teknologjise/>

<sup>3</sup> Eurostat (2022). Database available at <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/digital-economy-and-society/data/database>

Indicator	European Union - 27 countries	Albania
Individuals with basic or above basic overall digital skills (all five component indicators are at basic or above basic level)	54	24
Individuals with the above basic overall digital skills (all five component indicators are at the above basic level)	26	4
Individuals with basic overall digital skills (all five component indicators are at basic or above the basic level, without being all above basic)	27	20
Individuals with low overall digital skills (four out of five component indicators are at basic or above basic level)	17	17
Individuals with narrow overall digital skills (three out of five component indicators are at basic or above basic level)	9	17
Individuals with limited overall digital skills (two out of five component indicators are at basic or above basic level)	5	14
Individuals with no overall digital skills	11	21

Source: EUROSTAT (own graphic elaboration) <sup>4</sup>

### **The elderly and low-income citizens struggle the most**

The most problematic of this event becomes the disadvantages for the elderly. The use of this system for seniors is almost impossible due to the limitation they have in using the internet. This is evidenced by the citizens who were in a state of disarray since the very beginning and currently are spending more for any given service. Obtaining documents on-line is impossible for seniors because they have no information that hundreds of documents are only obtained online.

The system requires to have an e-mail address, which more than 90% of Albanians over 65 years of age do not have. Therefore, to solve their problems related to the pension or receiving the disability payment, or others, they continue to stand in lines outside some now-

<sup>4</sup> Eurostat (2022). Database available at [https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=isoc\\_sk\\_dskl\\_i21&lang=en](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=isoc_sk_dskl_i21&lang=en)

closed government counters just to get some information. The government claimed that every institution will have a Call Center available to help the elderly, but it has only created confusion, delays, and more expenditures. The internet centers in the neighborhoods have started to profit from this. In short, young people, internet and online savvy are “helping” seniors and others, against payment for issuing their certificates. To add to their burden, many of these senior citizens have no option but to pay, because their offspring have emigrated. They are left alone in a digitalized world, a world that they do not know.

The second group is the low-income households. Most of the ones belonging to this category live in rural areas, more often than ever without a stable internet connection, and mostly without smartphones or computers. According to the latest data, the available share of internet users nationwide is around 80%; the rest is mostly living under the poverty line and never had the chance to get any technological approach.

For many that express their frustration, a radical change cannot be initiated from one day to the other without leaving any chances for other alternative solutions. The portal should have gone through a trial period until it was fully tested, to avoid disruption, costs, and distrust of online services.

## **Conclusion**

Contrary to what was predicted, citizens have enormous difficulties in using this system for a variety of reasons, starting from owning a smartphone or computer connected to the internet, to the ability to use an online platform that requires some basic skills. Albanian experts argue that the population had to be educated first, have some hybrid form of services, (online plus in-person), and then provide all services online. In the overall estimation, this entire process seems more like a finished homework and check for some boxes on the “to-do-list” given by the EU rather than a true policy benefiting Albanians at this point in time.